

To live in fragments

Howards End and Pointz Hall as synecdoches
for the Condition of England

Luísa Maria Flora

FLUL; CEAL/ULICES

In *A Mensagem da Casa: Ensaio de Interpretação sobre The Forsyte Saga de John Galsworthy e Howards End de E. M. Forster* (1959), Fernando de Mello Moser considers the symbolical value of the houses and emphasizes the meanings of house and home as both tokens of civilisation and expressions of the fatherland. He argues that to value the house is a way of valuing the people in it and, with Lionel Trilling, associates the fate of the house in Forster's novel with the destiny of England.¹ If the quest for beauty and a legacy of foregone values implies nostalgia for the past, in their different ways the dwellings in Galsworthy and Forster function as treasure-houses of memory. Moser defends that the characters' relationships with the family country house define the sort of legacy to be inherited; the country houses are to become places of happiness (however fleeting), where past, present and future will be fused together.

All the houses addressed in Moser's dissertation are symbolically important. This essay only focuses on Howards End and contrasts it with Pointz Hall, the Oliver's family house in Virginia Woolf's posthumously published *Between the Acts* (1941). In both novels the houses are synecdoches for the condition of England yet their considerable

differences come to represent distinct historical moments and shifting senses of English national identity.²

At the heart of *Howards End* lies Forster's nostalgia for an idealized non-industrial idyllic England. Published in 1910, the "novel [...] attempts to neatly contain some essence of English identity" (Weihl: 456). But any unequivocal correspondence of the country house in *Howards End* with a "pastoral dream of Englishness" (*idem, ibidem*) is in fact declined by Forster.³ Aware of the transformations occurring, he brings them thematically (though not aesthetically) into the narrative he creates. However much he may long for a rural idyll, Forster recognizes that such ideal is no longer plausible. He acknowledges this both in the ambivalent nature of some of the main characters and in the situation of the house.

The property sits unpromisingly close to the metropolis. By the end of the text the Schlegel sisters are happily settled in *Howards End*, their family memories, furniture and future welcomed by the place. The final dialogue between Margaret and Helen epitomizes this:

[...] "There are moments when I feel *Howards End* peculiarly our own."
"All the same, London's creeping."

She pointed over the meadow – over eight or nine meadows, but at the end of them was a red rust.

"You see that in Surrey and even Hampshire now", she continued. "I can see it from the Purbeck downs. And London is only part of something else, I'm afraid. Life's going to be melted down, all over the world."⁴
(Forster, *Howards End*: 329)

The ambivalent status of *Howards End* and the novel's "denouement" represent as Craig McLean (13-14) argued in 2005:

[...] a rentier-class suburban fantasy of an idyllic house in the English countryside, rather than an authentic rural experience. [...] the extent to which *Howards End* fuses traditional bucolic values with burgeoning modernity, individualism, and liberal progressiveness [has been underestimated]. The suburban idyll created at *Howards End* has been gradually divorced from the rural landscape. By fencing off and suburbanising the garden that surrounds the property from the hay meadow outside the owners [...] remove the symbolic link between house and the productive English countryside.⁵

The Edwardian middle-class characters depicted in the novel are merging the urban with an illusion of the rural, blurring former boundaries between the country and the capital: “[...] Howards End is located within the Edwardian suburban paradigm”, no “architectural and ideological distillation of rural England and its values” (McLean: 13). Margaret Schlegel’s pragmatic connection with Henry Wilcox and their family life in Howards End powerfully convey, with the advance of the red tide of semi-detached houses built for financial speculation, the capitalist ventures of the Empire and the dominance of the City of London over culture, agriculture and industry (Hegglund: 409). The alliance of the (professedly) liberal culture represented by the Schlegels with the (definitely) sound business judgement of the Wilcox family announces the eventual downfall of a way of life that was already doomed before the First World War.⁶ By the early twentieth century, however deep his misgivings about the condition of England may be, Forster does acknowledge the rise of a new English identity, one that he feels as disquietingly different from, though still indebted to, a traditional rural ethos.

After many incidents and protracted house hunting, the Schlegels’ idealised domestic space becomes the tranquil residence where they and an emasculated Henry bring up Helen’s son as a family.⁷ In *Between the Acts* Pointz Hall carries very diverse meanings to three generations of Olivers. In June 1939, the old patriarch Bart Oliver, a dyspeptic former Indian army officer, and his sister Lucy represent the past. Both, although in very dissimilar ways, are strongly attached to what went before. The younger couple, Isa and Giles Oliver, is clearly divided, haunted by the everyday presence of brutal violence, by the threat of approaching war and the possibility of no future. Their two young children may not outlive the conflict. The current unsuitability of the house’s location to Giles and Isa represents their fundamental incompatibility to their time and their lives. And it symbolizes their generation’s major frustrations, “The doom of sudden death hanging over us [...] The future shadowed their present” (Woolf, *Between the Acts*: 83). Contrary to Henry Wilcox, Giles has no capital. He feels trapped, spends his life in, to cite Aunt Lucy: “[...] buying and selling – glass beads was it? or stocks and shares? – to savages who wished

most oddly – for were they not beautiful naked? – to dress and live like the English?” (Woolf: 34). Giles would have liked to be a farmer but works in the City and faces long train journeys to be with his family at week-ends. “Given his choice, he would have chosen to farm. But he was not given his choice” (*idem, ibidem*). Isa is withdrawn. She does not feel at home either in the old country house or in London. She would have liked to be a poet, is of ancient Irish descent and does not belong.

The treasured childhood home of Ruth Wilcox, Howards End evokes some abstract ideal of quintessential Englishness, some national character Forster identified with and, however falteringly, still celebrated in 1910. On the surface, the property suggests continuity, stability and tradition, the lasting values of a peaceful country setting. Yet, very early in the novel, its enduring status as “the real thing” is at best uncertain.

The station for Howards End was at Hilton, one of the large villages that are strung so frequently along the North Road [...]. Being near London, it had not shared in the rural decay, and its long High Street had budded out right and left into residential estates. (Forster: 29)

When the train stops at Hilton Mrs. Munt observes:

“The station, like the scenery, like Helen’s letters, struck an indeterminate note. Into which country will it lead, England or Suburbia? It was new, it had island platforms and a subway, and the superficial comfort exacted by businessmen.” (Forster: 29-30)

Before long the reader is aware that, with the exception of the tranquil Ruth who was born and lives there, cherishes the place and will shortly die, the Wilcox family finds Howards End convenient (it is only one hour-long railway journey from London) but does neither experience it as home nor even begin to understand its meaning to the first Mrs. Wilcox.⁸

To them Howards End was a house: they could not know that to her it had been a spirit, for which she sought a spiritual heir. [...] Is it credible that the possessions of the spirit can be bequeathed at all? Has the soul

offspring? A wych-elm tree, a vine, a wisp of hay with dew on it – can passion for such things be transmitted where there is no bond of blood? (Forster: 107)

Unlike Ruth, whose ancestry directly links her to a rural community and, as such, to a (supposedly) more organic and authentic English past, her family has no true sense of belonging to a place, any place. For most of the novel father and children are restless, almost always on the move. Only the (initially improbable) compromise and alliance that conclude the text eventually settle the older Mr. Wilcox down.

Within the long distinguished critical practice of reading this house symbolically Paul Delany's 1988 "'Islands of Money': Rentier Culture in *Howards End*" is now particularly helpful.⁹ Focusing on "the export of capital – that is to say, the displacement of industry overseas – and the emergence of an influential rentier class" (Delany: 290), the essay shows how the novelist was in search of "a true alternative to modernity" (*idem, ibidem*), how the Schlegel sisters come to represent "through a code of personal conduct" (Delany: 292) the possibility of cultural continuity. Of course and, I would say, at the very least, "their retreat into pastoralism is not really an adequate solution to the 'Condition-of-England' issues" (Delany: 292-3) in the novel.

Margaret is aware of her contradictory situation. In London, the huge ever-changing metropolis, she feels increasingly uneasy; by the end of the novel she has not moved to a genuine rural community. And she walks a thin line between the politically conservative philistine values of the Wilcox family and her professed cultured liberal beliefs.

If Wilcoxes hadn't worked and died in England for thousands of years, you and I couldn't seat here without having our throats cut. There would be no trains, no ships to carry us literary people about in, no fields even. Just savagery. No – perhaps not even that. Without their spirit life might never have moved out of protoplasm. More and more do I refuse to draw my income and sneer at those who guarantee it. (Forster: 177-8)

Margaret acknowledges her privileges as beneficiary of a large unearned income and recognizes this as the result of the assertiveness of those she used to disdain. The Wilcoxes run the Imperial and

West African Rubber Company.¹⁰ Her (then prospective) husband is the same “man who had carved money out of Greece and Africa, and bought forests from the natives for a few bottles of gin” (Forster: 277). If a recurrent interpretation of the novel supports a clear-cut distinction between the two families, their real differences need to be qualified. As Norman Page (79) notes, “the moral action of the novel takes place in the space between the two rather than urging the claims of one at the expense of the other”. Margaret mediates between Henry and Helen; their reconciliation shows how they were in fact nearer than might be expected. “You and Henry learned to understand one another and to forgive [...]” (Forster: 328). She has come to learn and accept that the Wilcoxes may be unimaginative, even morally shallow, but were it not through their dynamic imperialism no affluent family life would be possible in *Howards End*, no compromise or stability (however fleeting) attainable. Allowances having been made, Henry’s past indiscretions eventually balance Helen’s unwed motherhood. *Howards End*, now both a house and a home, resists as a symbol of unity, continuity and community in an unstable world.

In 1910 Forster is still able to celebrate this house as a place of safety while recognising suburbia impinging on a once idyllic rural neighbourhood; in 1941 Woolf is, characteristically, much more ambivalent – the ancient country place is the object of both celebration and parody. Pointz Hall is neither a sheltered house nor a secure home for former builders of Empire or their inheritors.

In *Howards End* the sense of a society trying to fend off change while nonetheless undergoing a swift powerful transition (as well as the menace of German militarism) is pervasive yet controlled.¹¹ The novel was written and published in an atmosphere of escalating international tension but no one may possibly have anticipated the devastation of the coming years. Work on *Between the Acts* began in 1938 and the last typescript was finished in February 1941.¹² Written through the coming of the Second World War and the Blitz, it persistently announced the looming annihilation of a way of life that had gone on for centuries. Never an enthusiast of nationalism, in any shape or form, Woolf is throughout her *oeuvre* nonetheless fascinated

by Englishness, devoted to the English scenery, passionate about English literature. In Gillian Beer's (96) words:

Despite her abhorrence of the imperialism and patriarchy of English society past and present [...] she is yet attracted by the idea of English history and of England. [...] to express England without false patriotism she must work through parody and pastiche, fracturing and conjuring the verbal traces of the past [...].¹³

For Woolf no plausible or reliable model of Englishness is available. She treasures the English landscape, she cherishes the English language and literature quite as authentically as she recoils from any form of smug nationalism. Both thematically and aesthetically she builds her profound ambivalence into the text. "[T]he novel is designed precisely to express both antinationalist and nationalist sentiments, [...] [its] irony reflects Woolf's interest in redefining, not eschewing, national tradition" (Etsy: 93).

Pointz Hall, inextricably linked to the core of (an ideal of) Englishness, goes much further back in history than the Oliver family, now totally vulnerable before the impending war, incapable of protecting either itself or the property.

The Olivers, who had bought the place something over a century ago, had no connection with the Warings, the Elveys, the Mannerings or the Burnets; the old families who had all intermarried, and lay in their deaths intertwined like the ivy roots beneath the churchyard wall.

Only something over a hundred and twenty years the Olivers had been there. Still, on going up the principal staircase – there was another, a mere ladder at the back for the servants – there was a portrait. A length of yellow brocade was visible half-way up; as one reached the top a small powdered face [...] came into view; an ancestress of sorts. Six or seven rooms opened out of the corridor. The butler had been a soldier; had married a lady's maid; and, under a glass case there was a watch that had stopped a bullet on the field of Waterloo. (Woolf: 5)

The Olivers' country residence is too remote to face the threat of suburbia: "[...] the train took over three hours to reach this remote village in the very heart of England" (Woolf: 12). Only thirty-five miles

from the sea, the country house provides no adequate shelter for the coming war.¹⁴ It is pervaded by emptiness and silence, “[...] a vase stood in the heart of the house, alabaster, smooth, cold, holding the still, distilled essence of emptiness, silence” (Woolf: 27).

The village pageant is represented out in the open where everything – and everybody – is exposed to annihilation. Through the yearly repetition of the pageant on the estate, the older Olivers try to re-enact the past and a sense of community, when all classes come together to participate either as performers, the villagers, or as audience, the gentry. Englishness is revisited through its social distinctions and its literary culture. The pageant is rooted in landscape and cultural tradition. It is a treasure-house of literature and passionately re-examines English history from its origins to the present day – June 1939.

The storyline of national identity is deconstructed in Pointz Hall by a playwright who is a foreigner and a lesbian. In a provocative Woolfian move, the character of Miss La Trobe is an outsider and, as such, both excluded and empowered by her difference from the community. At the end of the pageant mirrors are turned upon the audience thus reversing the roles. “She presents [the audience] with their own mirror reflection, [...] supplies the voice, the image and the text of their past and of their present” (Benziman: 61).

[The Reverend continued] “Speaking merely as one of the audience, I confess I was puzzled. For what reason, I asked, were we shown these scenes? [...] To me at least it was indicated that we are members one of another. Each is part of the whole. [...] We act different parts; but are the same. [...] I caught myself too reflected [...]” (Laughter) “Scraps, orts and fragments! Surely, we should unite?” (Woolf: 137-8)

The pageant is now a present-day (necessarily?) parodic version of the patriarchal narrative. No illusion of pastoral bliss is allowed to last for long. The spectre of war is always there. “The window was all sky without colour. The house had lost its shelter” (Woolf: 157-8). Forster’s hopeful “Only connect! [...] Live in fragments no longer” has been replaced by the gloomy “scraps, orts and fragments” so often recurring in Woolf’s last novel.¹⁵

The country house in Pointz Hall is impotent to provide sanctuary, no longer able to represent any ideal of essentialized Englishness. “Did he [Giles] hear some distant music? [...] [His] word was cut in two. A zoom severed it. Twelve aeroplanes in perfect formation like a flight of wild duck came overhead. *That* was the music” (Woolf: 138-9).

Divided between a deep-rooted attachment to her literary and cultural legacy and her lifelong mistrust of patriotism and patriarchy, throughout the text Woolf parodies the *clichés* of nationalistic discourse while honouring the language and literature she treasured.

The novel’s ingenious mode of constructing and deconstructing two contradictory positions moves *Between the Acts* even further away from *Howards End* than the momentous historical fracture between their respective dates or the natural difference between the two writers may account for.

Between the Acts [is] Woolf’s most English novel, the novel that records most fully her complex feelings about the English past, the English way of life, the nature of English genius and of English society, sharply ranked and distrustful of outsiders as it is. [...] Though *Between the Acts* is as humorously critical of English insularity as ever – of English snobbery, conservatism, xenophobia – it is also imbued with love for a country anticipating a foreign invasion. (Briggs: 201, 203)

Of course, unlike Forster, Woolf was an enthusiastic Londoner. The metropolis was for her a place of recurrent stimulation and a vital part of her ideal of Englishness.¹⁶ In *Howards End*, the crucial issue is definitely not how rural or suburban the country estate is, but what such situation may represent. And in *Between the Acts* the issue is neither the proximity of London nor the encroaching of suburbia, Pointz Hall being too out-of-the-way to be threatened by either. The real disquieting issue is the utter annihilation of everything the Hall – as a microcosm of English culture – still is and stands for: “At any moment guns would rake that land into furrows; planes splinter Bolney Minster into smithereens and blast the Folly. He [Giles] too loved the view” (Woolf: 39). The beast is near. No matter how much she continues to despise the imperialistic implications of Englishness,

Woolf “[can] not resist the upsurge of patriotic feeling that the War brought” (Briggs: 203).¹⁷

The question here no longer is “Who shall inherit England?” or even “What England will be inherited?” but “Will there be an England to inherit?”.¹⁸

At the conclusion of *Howards End* “There were shouts of infectious joy”. (Forster: 332). Near the beginning of *Between the Acts*: “Here came the sun – an illimitable rapture of joy, embracing every flower, every leaf. Then in compassion it withdrew, covering its face, as if it forebore to look on human suffering” (Woolf: 17).

Notes

- 1 Lionel Trilling, *E. M. Forster*. Norfolk: New Directions, new rev. ed. 1967 (1943).
- 2 For the (invention of the) concept of Englishness and some of its transformations see, among others, Robert Colls and Philip Dodd eds., *Englishness: Politics and Culture 1880-1920*. London: Croom Helm, 1986; Jed Esty, *A Shrinking Island: Modernism and National Culture in England*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2004 and Julia Briggs, *Reading Virginia Woolf*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2006.
- 3 On the rich ambivalence of this novel see, among others, David Bradshaw. "Howards End", *The Cambridge Companion to E. M. Forster*. Ed. David Bradshaw. 1st ed. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007. 151-172. *Cambridge Companions Online*. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/CCOL0521834759.011> (last accessed 10 April 2015).
- 4 "Red rust" i.e. red brick suburban houses of the late 19th and early 20th centuries whose poor architectural and building quality would soon condemn them to obsolescence.
- 5 McLean's persuasive interpretation is avowedly very different from Trilling's.
- 6 See Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture*, London: Bodley Head, 1992 (particularly Part I).
- 7 "[Henry] is not ill. Eternally tired. He has worked very hard all his life and noticed nothing" (Forster: 326), Margaret says to Helen.
- 8 Although Charles is more attached to his mother's house than any of the other Wilcoxes. Cf. Forster, ch. xv. 99-100.
- 9 Paul Delany. "'Islands of Money': Rentier Culture in E. M. Forster's *Howards End*". *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920*, 31, no. 3. 1988. 285-296.
Also at <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/elt/summary/v031/31.3.delany.html>.
- 10 As emphasised by Bradshaw, 131.
- 11 "[...] the remark 'England and Germany are bound to fight' renders war a little more likely each time that it is made, and is therefore made the more readily by the gutter press of either nation" (Forster: 74).
- 12 From 2 April 1938 to the conclusion of the typescript, on 26 February 1941, "Pointz Hall" was the working title of *Between the Acts*.
- 13 The essayist is here referring to several of Woolf's texts, not only to the last novel.
- 14 "[Pointz Hall] is at once an already-opened space and a relic of the Victorian sanctuary which, in 1939, no longer exists as such." Emily Cersonsky and Anne Aufhauser, "'Cold Pastoral': Virginia Woolf's Reevaluation of the Late Modernist Aesthetic in *Between the Acts*". http://modernism.research.yale.edu/wiki/index.php/Between_the_Acts (last accessed 17 April 2015).
- 15 "Only connect! That was the whole of [Margaret's] sermon. Only connect the prose and the passion, and both will be exalted, and human love will be seen at its highest. Live in fragments no longer. Only connect, and the beast and the monk, robbed of the isolation that is life to either, will die" (Forster: 188).
- 16 Only ill health or the war managed to keep her away in the country. Her oeuvre exalts London's unique atmosphere and in *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) perhaps better than anywhere else.
- 17 "[F]aced with the probable obliteration of people, landscape, and history in the war, Woolf sought to produce another idea of England, one which might survive, but survive without portentousness – as mixture and common place" (Beer: 147).
- 18 "Like the plots of so many English novels, the plot of *Howards End* is about the rights of property, about a destroyed will-and-testament and rightful and wrongful heirs. It asks the question, 'Who shall inherit England?'" (Trilling: 118).

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